

Humphreys College

NEWSLETTER SUPPLEMENT

FALL QUARTER

DECEMBER 2015

MEET THE AUTHOR

ROBIN BURCELL: NOBODY CAN FIX A BLANK PAGE

Robin Burcell started out as the first female officer for the Lodi Police Department in 1983 and spent 18 years there before leaving to work for the County of Sacramento as a Criminal Investigator, the equivalent to an investigator for the district attorney. She retired from there.

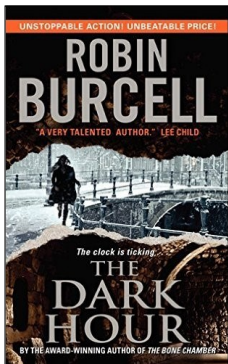
Students at Humphreys College were able to meet Robin Burcell during the summer quarter and found her to be a captivating speaker. Along with Katie Romanek and the former Lodi Police Chief & Mayor Larry Hansen, she presented the happy ending to an abduction story: in 1994, Katie, a 12-year-old student at Vinewood School, was kidnapped from her home in Lodi. Katie Romanek is currently a student at Humphreys College.

After the presentation, Robin Burcell agreed to answer our questions about her successful writing career.



How does a criminal investigator become an author?

“In 1986, I attended the FBI Forensic Art course at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. Since then I’ve done dozens upon dozens of sketches for various law enforcement entities in the Valley, including the FBI, for crimes that range from murders to robberies. The forensics of the sketching comes into play when the victim is a corpse that needs to be identified: for example, a murder victim who has no ID, whose fingerprints are no longer present or the body is decomposed. A sketch of the victim needs to be done for public viewing in hopes of learning his or her identity.”



You published your first book in 1995, after you had already been on the force for twelve years.

“That book was a time-travel/mystery/romance. It was a lot of fun, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to continue in that genre, so I started the Kate Gillespie San Francisco Police Homicide series (*Every Move She Makes*, *Fatal Truth*, *Deadly Legacy*, *Cold Case*). Next up was the Sydney Fitzpatrick FBI Forensic Artist series (*Face of a Killer*, *The Bone Chamber*, *The Dark Hour*, *The Black List*, and *The Kill Order*, which was named by *Library Journal* as one of the best thrillers of 2014). My next book, *The Last Good Place*, is out in November 2015. This book is a continuation of the late Carolyn Weston’s series of novels, which were the basis for the hit 1970s television show *The Streets of San Francisco*.”

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How does one become an award-winning author of ten novels?

“I made time to work towards that goal, even if it was just a few minutes every day. I was employed full time as a police officer and had three young children at home, so I carved out a little time each day to work on my projects. I also read trade journals, joined writers’ organizations and attended their conferences, trying to learn the business and art of writing. I also read a lot of fiction, learning from other writers.”

To which extent have your law enforcement experiences inspired your novels?

“When I switched genres from that first everything-under-the-sink book (time travel/mystery/romance) to straight mystery, and later thrillers, I definitely used my background in law enforcement as an inspiration, sometimes even using real crimes as the basis for a story. I wanted to give my novels that feeling of authenticity, to entertain, and make sure that readers were getting a taste for what it might actually be like to be a police officer and be involved in crime fighting. The reality is that books are *way more* exciting than real life, but you get my point!”

Why did you decide to write series?

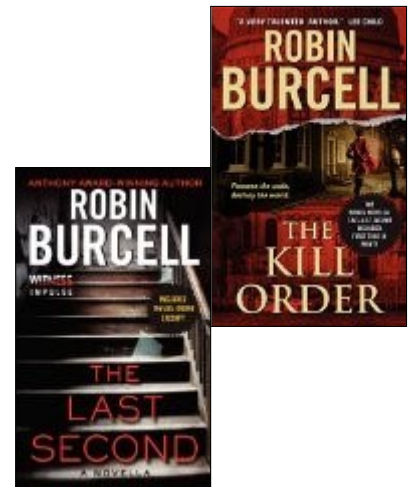
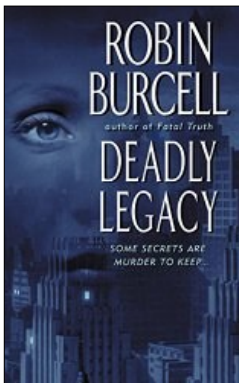
“I like writing series novels because it allows for longer story arcs. One can pick up any of my novels and read it as a standalone. However, if one were to read them in order, there’s an extra payoff in that the whole story arc of the main characters is revealed. It’s similar to watching a good series on television (for example, *Law & Order*), where you don’t have to tune in at the beginning of the season. You can watch each episode on its own—but if you do tune in at the beginning, you get to know more about the main characters and their personal life.”

I assume that your work has been influenced by other writers.

“Too many to mention! But I started off with Nancy Drew—which really doesn’t hold up to the times, Sherlock Holmes, which does hold up, and many of the classics, including *Prisoner of Zenda*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and other action-adventures. I absolutely detested the classics forced on us by high school teachers, like *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*. I wanted to be on the swashbuckling ships or racing across the countryside on horseback.”

Our Newsletter is read by college students. What would be your best advice to them as writers?

“For big projects like essays or major reports, do a little bit every day. It’s so much easier! Most students feel overwhelmed when asked to write a five- to ten-page report. In comparison, I am faced with writing a story of 500+ pages; suddenly, that five-page essay looks like a breeze. But whether five or five hundred pages, just start! Then, next thing you know, you have a paragraph done, then two, then more.”



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What if the writing is not good?

“One way to look at it is that you can’t fix a blank page. Try to get it down. You can fix it later. The next best advice is to print out what you have written and then review the hardcopy pages before you turn them in. I do this with every book. You see things differently when you are holding a pen while completing a paper. I guarantee your assignments will be better if you work from a hardcopy, at least once during the process.”

I believe each student can also benefit from a tutor or an experienced instructor as a proofreader. I am sure that you as a writer work closely with book editors.

“A good editor is worth his or her weight in gold. I have been fortunate to have very good editors. Any writer who thinks that he does not need an editor is kidding himself. Editors see the big picture. They can tell when a story doesn’t start at the right point, veers off course or goes on too long. That old saying *Can’t see the forest for the trees* applies here because, as a writer, you are too close to your work and you can’t see where it’s going wrong. I suppose there is a rare individual who can. However, I haven’t met him yet.”

What are your experiences with literary agents?

“It’s harder to get an agent than it is to sell a book, but it’s hard to sell a book without an agent. With self-publishing so easy to do, many are taking that route. But the majority of self-published novels might only sell a few hundred copies. There are success stories in self-publishing, but like in any profession, the majority doesn’t make more than hobby status as far as earnings. Someone once advised me that a bad agent is worse than no agent. Truer words were never spoken.”

Tell us more about yourself as a reader.

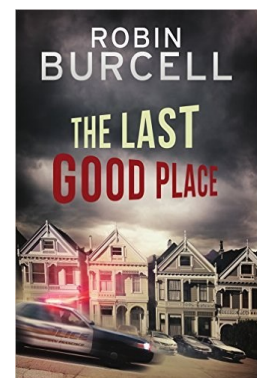
“I love to read! It doesn’t matter what genre. Young adult books (*Harry Potter*), mysteries, romance, science fiction... A good book is a good book.”

Are you active on social media?

“I am active on Facebook and somewhat on Twitter. However, I don’t do much on other social-media platforms. I’ve been on the local news a number of times over the years. I’ve appeared in several television shows depicting true crime (e.g., ID Channel) as the law enforcement expert commentator. I’ve even appeared in a BBC/National Geographic production as a forensic artist for *Bigfoot: The New Evidence*. (I sketched a baby bigfoot from a witness who claimed to have shot it.)”

What is your latest writing project?

“I’m currently co-writing a novel with #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Clive Cussler. That book, as of yet untitled, will be out in September 2016.”



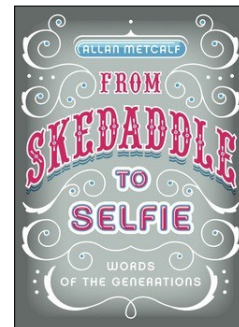
~Stanislav Perkner

FROM THE NEW BOOKS

📖 **Allan Metcalf.** *From Skedaddle to Selfie: Words of the Generations.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

From Baby Boomers with “groovy” and “yuppie,” to Generation X with “whatever” and “like,” each generation inevitably comes to use certain words that are particular to its unique time in history. Those words not only tell us a great deal about the people in those generations, but highlight their differences with other generations.

“Selfie,” for example, goes with the Millennial Generation, born in the 1980s and 1990s. “Slacker” comes from Generation X, born in the 1960s and 1970s. “Groovy” was a way their predecessors, the Baby Boomers, expressed approval. And the Silent Generation (born 1925-42) were the first to be known as teenagers and to listen to “rock and roll.” As for the G.I. Generation (born 1901-24), they were “swell,” while their predecessors, the Lost Generation (born 1883-1900), were the first to be “sexy.”



In this entertaining compilation, Allan Metcalf shows that each generation—those born within the same roughly 20-year time period—can be identified and characterized by its key words. Metcalf tells the story of the history and usage of these words, starting with the American Revolution and ending with the post-Millennial Homeland Generation. The author tells the stories of dozens of words. With special attention to the differences in vocabulary among today’s generations—the Millennials, the grunge music of Generation X, hippies among the Boomers, and Bobbysoxers among the Silents—*From Skedaddle to Selfie* compiles dozens of words we thought we knew, and tells the unheard stories of each and how they accompanied its generation through its time.

Allan Metcalf is author of six previous books on language, most recently *OK: The Improbable Story of America's Greatest Word* (Oxford University Press, 2010). He posts weekly to the Lingua Franca blog of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and as executive secretary of the American Dialect Society, invented that group's annual vote on Word of the Year. He is Professor of English at MacMurray College and consultant to attorneys on matters of language and law.



📖 **Richard W. Bailey.** *Speaking American: A History of English in the United States.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

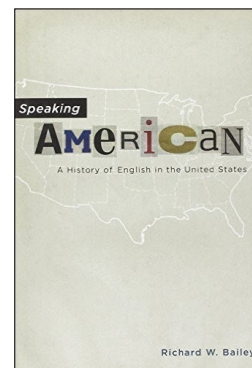
When did English become American? What distinctive qualities made it American? What role have America's democratizing impulses, and its vibrantly heterogeneous speakers, played in shaping our language and separating it from the mother tongue?

A wide-ranging account of American English, Richard Bailey's *Speaking American* investigates the history and continuing evolution of our language from the sixteenth century to the present. The book is organized in half-century segments around influential centers: Chesapeake Bay (1600-1650), Boston (1650-1700), Charleston (1700-1750), Philadelphia (1750-1800), New Orleans (1800-1850), New York (1850-1900), Chicago (1900-1950), Los Angeles (1950-2000), and Cyberspace (2000-present). Each of these places has added new words, new inflections, new ways of speaking to the elusive, boisterous, ever-changing linguistic experiment that is American English. Freed from British constraints of unity and propriety, swept up in rapid social change, restless movement, and a thirst for innovation, Americans have always been eager to invent new words, from earthy frontier expressions like "catawampously" (vigorously) and "bung-nipper" (pickpocket), to West African words introduced by slaves such as "goober" (peanut) and "gumbo" (okra), to urban slang such as "tagging" (spraying graffiti) and "crew" (gang).

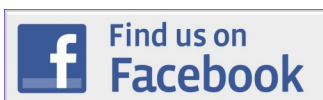
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Bailey focuses on how people speak and how speakers change the language. The book is filled with transcripts of voices, precisely situated in time and space: two justices of the peace sitting in a pumpkin patch trying a Native American for theft; a crowd of Africans lounging on the waterfront in Philadelphia discussing the newly independent nation in their home languages; a Chicago gangster complaining that his pocket had been picked; Valley Girls chattering; Crips and Bloods negotiating their gang identities in Angeles; and more.

Speaking American explores—and celebrates—the endless variety and remarkable inventiveness that have always been at the heart of American English.



Richard W. Bailey is the author of *Images of English: A Cultural History of the Language*, *Nineteenth-Century English*, and *Rogue Scholar: The Sinister Life and Celebrated Death of Edward H. Ruloff*. Bailey served in the course of his career as the President of the American Dialect Society and of the Dictionary Society of North America, and the associate editor for *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. A long-time faculty member at the University of Michigan, he retired as Fred Newton Scott Collegiate Professor of English.



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Humphreys College Newsletter *Supplement*, December 2015

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